

# Leaving Iraq?

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**WASHINGTON** – The hubristic hype that characterized the first 3 years of occupation following the invasion of March 2003 – years in which the Bush administration stubbornly pursued far too many misguided policies, even when it was apparent that they were not leading to success– has given way to the equally unchecked defeatist hype of those who were always against the war and of the many more who became disillusioned because the promised results (“Mission Accomplished”, “Mopping Up”, “A Few Die Hard Baathists”) were not reached and, many years later, are certainly not forthcoming.

As the atmosphere changed, it is now totally acceptable to describe Iraq, not only as a civil war or quagmire (which it is, at least in Baghdad, the physical and symbolic center of the country); but as a total, unmitigated disaster, now more frequently called a ‘debacle’. Now, this characterization is extreme and clearly incorrect; at least for the moment.

Related to military affairs, the term “debacle” means the end, final defeat. Waterloo was the final debacle of the Napoleonic dream. The signing of the unconditional surrender in 1945 represented the debacle of Nazi Germany. Dien Bien Phu was the debacle of the French colonial era in Indochina in 1954.

Manifestly, in Iraq, we are not there. We did not surrender. We have yet to run, after being routed , (think of the British leaving Dunkirk), leaving the territory to the enemies. The democratic government supported by the coalition, whatever its many weaknesses, is still there, with no viable alternative produced by the insurrectionists in sight. Nor can we say that Iraq, daily carnage notwithstanding, is in total chaos, Somalia style, or Congo circa 1998.

So, let us establish that there has been no "debacle". Yet, the casual way in which critics use terms that imply final defeat, not as a possibility, but as an obvious fact that needs no supporting evidence, is worrisome in as much it shows that in this matter we have the triumph of emotions and not of reason. An apocalyptic diagnosis is just as wrong as the unfounded sunny optimism ("We are winning") displayed until not too long ago by the administration. In a climate pervaded by emotions it will be very difficult to conduct an otherwise legitimate debate as to what should be the way forward in Iraq.

The critics seem to subscribe to at least two separate but concurrent views.

The first one indicates that the real priority at thi stage of the conflict is to save American lives. This is really "cut and run"; but in the name of the higher moral value of saving American lives from a doomed situation in a conflict that should have never been started and by definition cannot be won.

The second view is more complex. But it can be summarized as follows: "We Americans have to convey to the Iraqi authorities how disappointed we are realizing that they cannot do a better job. As they do not improve their performance, then, with regret, we Americans will have to acknowledge that the Iraqis are not really serious about their security and their future. As the Iraqis are not really doing their share and since we should not do more than what is fair, then this is a lost cause and we should leave them to their own devices". The parting shot will be: "Hey, we invested heavily. We tried our best, but you cannot keep on helping people who do not want to help themselves?"

It is easy to criticize the first view. From this standpoint, the primary objective of military operations is not to defeat an enemy so that we can accomplish a political goal; but to

minimize our human losses. If casualties mount and there is no immediate victory, then we should withdraw, because no protracted conflict is worth the mounting loss of American lives. According to these military theoreticians, in a war, either we can achieve immediately our goals or forget about the whole thing. Apparently no strategic goal is significant enough to justify the sacrifice of American lives.

The second school of thought, more complex and more nuanced, is however equally flawed. The objective here is in fixing the blame, not fixing the problem.

It is about scolding and punishing the Iraqis for their failures (and there are many). But this view leaves out of the equation the fundamental question as to how the US national interest is best served, regardless of what the Iraqi do or do not do efficiently. We could very well send "messages" to the Iraqis and then feel good about the fact that, before leaving, at least we tried. "We really hoped that they would shape up, but, alas, they did not. So, in good conscience, we did what we had to do and left. So there".

This approach, of course, assumes that it is entirely reasonable to expect that the first democratic coalition government ever to be elected in the whole history of the region, *ipso facto* will have acquired the maturity, the sophistication, the capacity and the expertise to behave according to the standards of modern day liberal democracies. As they are clearly falling short, after a couple of "tough love" attempts that did not work, then we should accept the evidence of their terminal failure to deliver. As time and again they have proven to be unable to shape up, we have to leave. Indeed. So, we flunked the bad student. This will teach him a lesson. Right? Unfortunately, here we are not in school. There may not be other opportunities for the unfocused Iraqis to concentrate and take the test again. Has anybody considered that the Iraqis are not shaping up because, given the infancy of their political institutions and the government they

formed, they are not yet capable?

It is a very easy job for the critics to point out all the failures of the Maliki Government. But, after we have fixed the blame and thus can feel good about our choices based on undeniably reasonable standards, (if applied to ordinary circumstances), can we say that we have fixed the problem? Besides "teaching a lesson" to the immature Iraqis, (fixing the blame) have we served our long term national interest?

Well, it depends on how the national interest is defined. If the national interest is identified in stopping, or at least drastically curtailing, as soon as possible the hemorrhaging of US blood and treasure, (just like in the first view), then, yes. But there is a question that all the reasonable critics who say, essentially, that "enough is enough" do not wish to confront. Namely: "Are there any serious strategic consequences, not for Iraq, but for the United States of America in abandoning the Iraqis to their own destiny?"

If we leave and Iraq collapses, can there be adverse short term or long consequences that will be so dire for us that, by comparison, supporting now, at a high price, the wobbling Maliki Government, hoping that improvements on the ground will gradually come about, would appear quite appealing?

The Bush administration has been vocal in pointing out the possible (certain for them) implications of a US withdrawal. These include: collapse of any residual law and order; full scale civil war; probable foreign intervention, (Iran to help the Shia, Arab countries to support the Sunnis, Turkey to thwart any attempt to create a Kurdistan that may claim territories under its sovereignty); the establishment of al Quaida sanctuaries and training camps, and ensuing chaos in a volatile region of continuing strategic significance for the US and the whole world in light of its oil production and reserves.

The problem is that by now the Bush administration has lost all credibility. Few listen to them. President Bush has one of the lowest favorable ratings in history, largely because of Iraq. We know why. Too many misrepresentations, too much braggadocio, too much hubris, far too many mistakes. And then the really belated removal of the most egregiously incompetent leaders; conceding, but only grudgingly and obviously under the duress imposed by political defeat, that huge mistakes have been made.

To all this, one has to add the ongoing dogged persistence in confusing effects for causes on the issue of the active threat represented by Islamic terrorists in Iraq, before as opposed to after the invasion.

Of course, Al Quaida and affiliates, after the US invasion, seized the opportunity and made messy Iraq an important, if not key, battlefield in which to continue their jihad against the West. Whereas, as al Quaida appeared on the scene, almost at the beginning of the troubles, the Bush administration declared that, since we are fighting al Quaida (among others) in Iraq, it is a plain fact that the Iraq campaign was and is an integral, in fact indispensable, component of the larger war on terror. (Prior to this, we were told that Iraq was part of the war on terror because of the likely connections between Saddam with WMD and Islamic terrorists).

But we know that this is incorrect. We know that Saddam, whatever evil plans he had concocted, and whatever support and sanctuary he gave to some terrorists, was a secular despot, interested in increasing his own secular power. He cannot be portrayed as a religious fanatic aimed at the reestablishment of some theocracy or mythical Caliphate, with sharia law and all that. He was a dangerous enemy; but he was not another bin Laden, nor was he bin Laden's logical ally.

Having discounted all these arbitrary connections that insist on making Iraq and the war on terror one and the same thing,

it would still be wise to examine the Iraq warnings coming from the White House, before dismissing them as more propaganda or, worse, ridiculing them as the incoherent ramblings of mono-maniacal individuals. (Indeed, as we know, many commentators and opposition politicians routinely use the adjective "delusional" to describe the state of mind of the president and the vice president regarding Iraq).

But this is not happening. The consensus is that the administration should follow majority opinion which clearly states that most Americans disapprove of the conduct of the war. Using tortuous logic, many commentators point out that even respected conservatives way back had warned against conducting long military operations without the support of public opinion. This is true. This is a democracy and public opinion is important. But this does not make public opinion right, however strong their beliefs can be. Public opinion is largely shaped by opinion leaders. So it can change; just as it changed from support to condemnation of the war, because most commentators had concluded, long ago, that the war was lost.

The truth of the matter is that the political leaders who favor withdrawal should also be willing to engage in a serious (as opposed to emotional) debate about the possible consequences of a failure of the American effort. So far, many have embraced withdrawal because politically this appears to be the best solution to placate a public tired of a costly stalemate. But if the public, after reviewing the possible ramifications of defeat, would be convinced instead that ending this hemorrhage of American blood through withdrawal would make things worse down the line, would they still favor withdrawal?

This is a pitfall that so far has been avoided in this debate. A weakened White House has not been able to force its opponents to take a clear position that would include taking responsibility for any adverse consequences that might emanate

by following their simple solution. Nonetheless, instead of just expressing skepticism about the latest presidential plan for a surge, the opponents have an obligation to spell out their plan and their evaluation of its possible consequences and ramifications. To bring up the Vietnam analogy, stating that, just as the “the dominos” did not fall in South East Asia, there will be no special repercussions after we leave Iraq, is at the very least simplistic. Different time, different place, different players, and no oil.

To those who wish to leave: elaborate a real plan, other than just a withdrawal timetable, and engage in a serious debate about its possible consequences. To say that Bush is no longer credible and thus we should not support anything he proposes and do instead the opposite, without further analysis of the consequences of a new course of action, is short sighted demagoguery. Certainly in line with the current mood of the nation— but demagoguery nonetheless.